

Elinor De Wire

Keeping the Lights for Kids

Fifth grade students at Charles Barnum Elementary in Groton, Connecticut, worked on a special advanced research project about lighthouses with Elinor De Wire in 1996. The girls used stamps, patches, advertising materials, books, maps, and the Internet to learn about lighthouse locations, their architectural styles, and day-marks. Courtesy Ann Pasquier.

On a snowy day last December, I visited the Edgewood Elementary School in Yardley, Pennsylvania, a small community north of Philadelphia. I was greeted by 130 second graders, who had recently done a mini-unit on Abbie Burgess at Matinicus Rock and were eager to share their love for lighthouses.

I wore a colorful lighthouse sweatshirt for the occasion, and a Nauset Light pin, complete with a blinking red beacon. As the classes filed into the all-purpose room where I had prepared a slide show and a table of “lighthouse memorabilia,” there was a crescendo of delighted squeals and gasps. I quickly found myself surrounded by excited children, who proceeded to spin me in all directions and give me a head-to-toe exam:

Ooohh, I know that one on her shirt! It's Cape Hatteras!

Hey! I've been to this one on her sleeve! Where'd you get that pin, Lighthouse Lady? I might get one too!”

Wow! She's even got a lighthouse watch! Do you live in a lighthouse? Do you know Abbie Burgess?

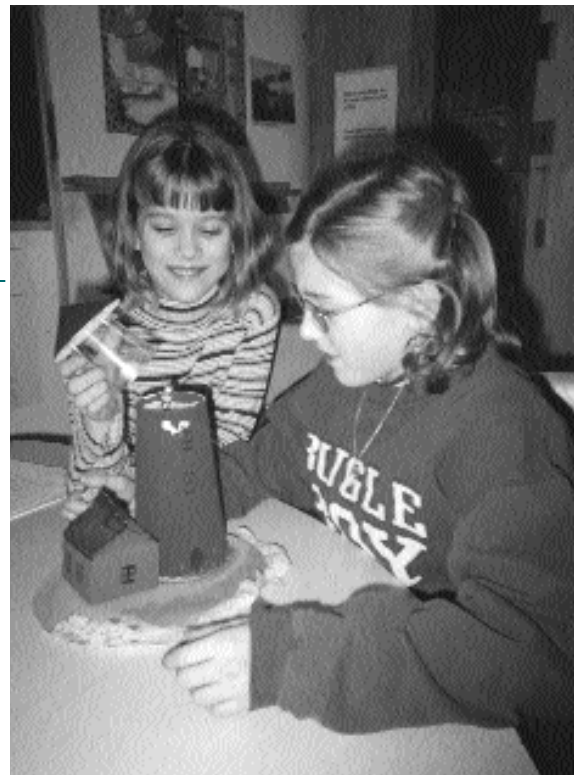
Did I know Abbie? Not personally; but I had a picture of her home on Matinicus Rock and a photograph of her grave in Spruce Head, Maine, and I knew a story about how she wanted a gravestone in the shape of a lighthouse.

How did she die? And when?

Why did people forget to put a lighthouse on her grave?

Who took care of her pet hens after she died? Did her ghost come back and haunt the lighthouse?

Such questions seem unimportant, even silly, when measured against the significance of Abbie's accomplishments and her unusual status as a youthful lady lightkeeper at a time when duty at a remote lighthouse was beset with unimaginable hardships. But these are the things seven-year-olds wonder about. I call them seed questions, because they grow into larger opportunities for learning. The kids at Edgewood Elementary had interest,



involvement, and commitment. They had begun to care for Abbie Burgess as a real person, and all their future learning about lighthouses would be an extension of their relationship with this special girl from the past.

Often we forget how sensory and concrete kids are in their perceptions of the world, including the past world. History means little to them unless it's made meaningful in some personal way that connects with their own lives. The best education, we know, is first-hand, and second to that is vicarious experience. For kids, it requires imagining themselves in someone's place and superimposing their world on another.

Not long ago, I was fortunate to visit Cape Cod during Maritime Week, when the lighthouses were open for visitors. Lines outside the towers were long, and there were many families with excited kids. Inside the base of Highland Light a volunteer gave an interesting talk on the history of the lighthouse. While he stood on the stairs above us, reciting dates and building specifications, we waited patiently to climb the tower—all of us except two youngsters. To their parents chagrin, they busily inspected everything, ignoring all pleas to “listen to the nice man” and “not touch.” Minutes later, when the group began its long ascent up the spiral stairs, the children's excitement echoed loudly.

Up on the windy lantern gallery, the lecture continued. But almost everyone had ceased hearing it and had begun to stare out to sea, mesmerized by the altitude and panorama—a seagull's

view of the great gray expanse of the Atlantic. Talk faded into the background, as the immediate experience of standing in the lightkeeper's shoes overwhelmed all of us.

For me, such encounters with children are "lighthouse heaven." What might have been a lost experience for a child—a history lecture filed in a dead-letter slot in his mind's mailroom—instead became a meaningful event on which he could build future learning. The children left that day knowing first-hand that lightkeepers had unusual challenges, that courage and determination were surely part of their fiber. It was a start. Perhaps it even sent them in search of a lighthouse book the next time their parents took them to the library.

Connecting kids with lighthouse history and lore means allowing them to explore space and access information using all the senses. Play is important, though it may not seem so. Running, jumping, touching, shouting, and other boisterous activity is often viewed as mischief, yet provides important information that helps very young children form concepts, or schemata as learning theorist Jean Piaget called them. The child's concept of "lighthouse" might contain details such as tall, big, round, cold, red, windy, open, noisy. A separate concept called "lightkeeper" develops, yet remains connected to "lighthouse." As children grow and access more information, concepts increase in complexity and give way to broader, more abstract learning.

But, let's not overlook the most obvious reason for all that liveliness. It's a celebration of discovery: "Wow! This is something new and exciting, and I just can't be still and quiet about it!" Teachers call this "educational noise" and recognize its value in a structured, guided environment.

Of course, we cannot have kids running up dangerous spiral stairways, jumping about on high parapets, and climbing the lantern railings. But we can design activities and interactive displays that allow for movement and exploration of the physical surroundings. Maine's Shore Village Museum has kid-friendly rooms that allow children to sound a foghorn, wind up clockworks, and stand inside a prism lens. At Michigan Maritime Museum, a large chalkboard mounted in the lighthouse display area lets kids sketch lighthouses and write their own poems. Mystic Seaport's interactive play about the lightkeeper's daughter invites kids to don simple costumes and take acting roles.

Opportunities for learning can be created inexpensively to reflect the technology, history, and lifestyle at lighthouses: nautical knot boards invite busy fingers, as do poles for hoisting signal flags, costume trunks for dressing up, felt or acrylic story boards, and bells with various tones; plastic prisms and colored plastic can investigate the properties

of light, a block and tackle will show how to rig for lifting, geometric patterns make tower shapes and daymarks, period games like stilts and hoops on the lawn invite play, along with a boat to sit in; mystery boxes invite exploration; storytelling and

Elinor's Lighthouse Box

A plastic tote box with handles and a lid holds everything you need for a fun off-site program. Many of these ideas also work well on-site. Here are some items to collect and share with kids:

- a plastic prism, mirror, and pen light for demonstrating how a lens works
- postcards and calendar pictures to show various daymarks & architectural styles
- a replica keeper's hat, buttons, and Lighthouse Service flag
- small resin models of lighthouses with pretty daymarks and various architectural forms
- postage stamps sealed in clear laminate
- lots of product labels that feature lighthouses
- rubber stamps and non-toxic stamp pad to decorate kids hands and papers
- souvenir stickers or cards (to give away)
- a poem to read (sometimes we create one together!)
- a stuffed animal for storytelling (I do Jinx the dog at St. Simons Lighthouse)
- prints of archival pictures mounted and sealed
- patches and pins (I sometimes wear these)
- a piece of rope as long as Cape Hatteras Light is tall (we go outside, measure and marvel!)
- my favorite lighthouse books
- small laminated print of Edward Hopper's "Two Lights"
- a bibliography of recommended books and videos for parents and teachers

Elementary kids enjoy making something to remember their lighthouse experience. I usually have teachers or scout leaders get simple, inexpensive materials. Paper cup lighthouse models, bookmarks, collages, and fog pictures are excellent activities to do on or off site. Consider having a camera and film on hand to capture the fun and learning. Display pictures on a bulletin board in your museum or visitor center. It's great publicity and sends a clear message that "kids are welcome visitors at lighthouses."

dramatic play recreate the keeper's world; and demonstrations can show how erosion occurs or fog forms. Not surprisingly, adults will have as much fun with these things as the kids do.

Interpreting on-site presents a greater challenge, but it can become wonderfully effective when interpreters connect with their own childhoods. What was important to us as children is still important to kids today—family, pets, playing, toys, feeling safe and happy, looking forward to holidays. These are the starting points for introducing bigger ideas.

During my visit to Cape Hatteras Light in July 1996, volunteer interpreter Rany Jennette shared his memories of growing up at the lighthouse in an unusual way. Rather than simply talking about it, he pulled out a shoebox in which he kept his “lighthouse farm.” Kids got to hold the cow, the sheep, the horse, the dog, the cat—various kinds of shells Jennette had found on the beach. As he explained the reasoning behind the names and showed how he and his siblings played farm with such simple objects, kids begin to participate in the past and sense that growing up at a lighthouse required lots of imagination. Toys came from the sea, and a boy had to create his own amusements.

For interpreters, the urge to barrage children with information is enormous. We sometimes feel we haven't done our job if children walk away without an abundance of facts jammed into their heads. Sadly, such information is lost quickly if not tied to some meaningful experience. And usually there's just too much for a small mind to assimilate. It's far better, I believe, to tickle the brain than to squeeze it. Present a few ideas—ideas you like and can get excited about—then allow kids to absorb and process them. Involve youngsters in thoughtful experiences that include a variety of senses and cause them to think critically and solve

problems. And above all, interact with children. They absorb almost nothing when they are passive listeners who cannot respond aloud or in some physical way.

For primary age kids, basic skills like counting, comparing, categorizing, identifying, patterning, and imitating are excellent ways to involve them and build on their concept of “lighthouse.” Ask: What shapes do you see in the windows? How many steps are there in each course? Can you feel the air moving up the tower? How is this side of the lens different from that side? Where is the shadow of the lighthouse and where is the sun? Let's imagine we're in a storm! Lean forward and walk into the wind; squint your eyes so the blowing sand doesn't get in them!

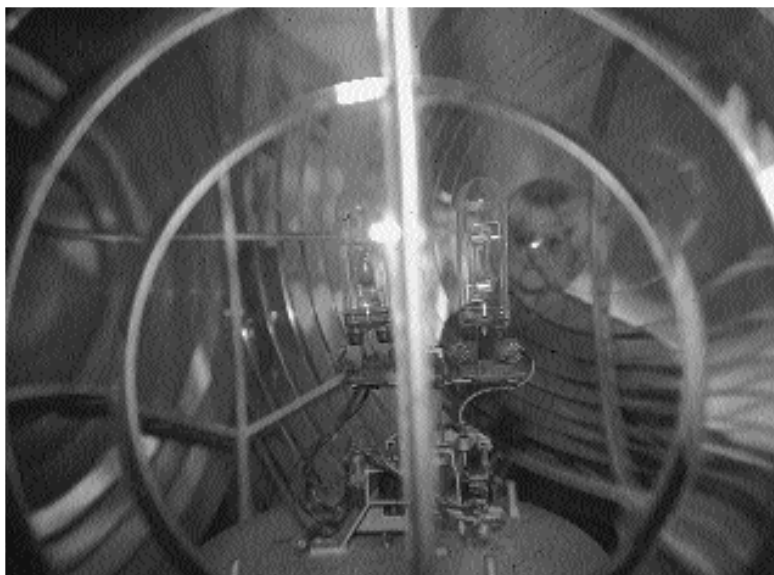
Older kids can think more deductively, make complex predictions and decisions, see cause and effect, and, by age 10, many are able to think abstractly. Ask: How is the lightkeeper going to get clean drinking water? How would you know a storm is coming? The keeper's wife is ready to have her baby, but he needs to get the lighthouse lit for the night so ships won't hit the rocks. What will he do? A bad storm has disabled the lens, and it won't turn. What can you do? You're out of meat and eggs. Where might you find them? It's 2:00 a.m. and you're on watch. What will you do to stay awake? What might happen if you don't?

Off-site, interpretation and teaching becomes more challenging because we don't have the raw experience of tower, beacon, wind, sand, and sea at hand. I've done many elementary and middle school programs about lighthouses in the last 20 years and teach a mini-unit about lighthouses every spring to my fifth grade class. The best advice I can give is “start collecting and get excited!” A box of “lighthouse stuff” is essential to provide the sensory input kids miss when not on-

site. I usually have an interactive slide show, telling stories as I go and doing a kind of “I Spy” game with the pictures I show. I try to set up a small display, usually of books and a poster or two. My box contains an assortment of “lighthouse” things that can be touched and discussed. It's a mystery box, because each item is revealed slowly with clues to pique curiosity.

Most importantly, I let my love for lighthouses shine when I'm with kids, and I let them know I enjoy being with them too. Enthusiasm is infectious. Any hobby or special interest, even a passionate one like mine,

The author's son, was transfixed by the huge lens of Point Arena Lighthouse when he visited the tower in 1985 at age seven. Lighthouse optics offer an unique opportunity for first-hand learning on important concepts of physics. Photo by Elinor De Wire.



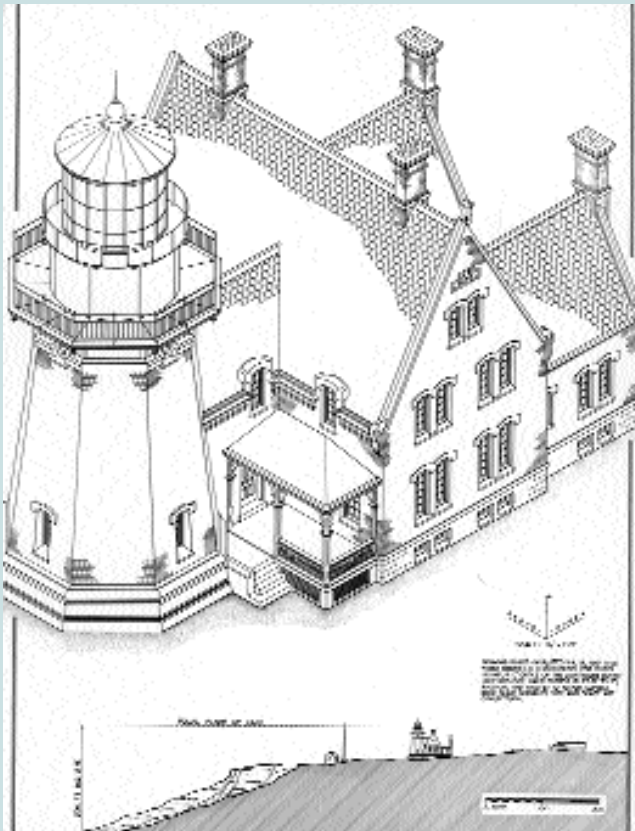
needs to be modeled for kids. They leave my programs thinking, "Wow! She's really into this. She loves lighthouses. Maybe I would enjoy this too."

Elinor De Wire has authored five books about lighthouses, including the Lighthouse Activity Book for kids, and written numerous articles on lighthouses for popular magazines. Her personal initiative to involve

children in the history, lore, and preservation of lighthouses has taken her to schools and youth organizations around the country. In her own elementary classroom in Connecticut, she teaches an interdisciplinary unit on lighthouses and has produced a home page devoted to the topic. Currently, she is at work on a young readers' novel called Libby at the Lighthouse.

Documenting Historic Lighthouses

In many cases, the first step in the preservation of a lighthouse, or any historic property, is documentation. The existing site should be recorded with drawings, photographs, and historical and descriptive reports to define the characteristics and significance of that site. The Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) program of the National Park Service was created in 1933 to develop this type of documentation, establishing a standardized collection of the American-built environment, held for perpetuity within the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress. This collection is available to the public and reproductions of the records can be obtained.



Isometric drawing from HABS documentation of Block Island Southeast Light Station, Block Island, Rhode Island. (HAER RI-27)

The HABS and HAER programs vary slightly in the process by which a site is recorded. HABS generally prepares documentation that reflects the "as is" existing condition of a site with historical background information in a written format. Little notation is made on the drawings. HAER generally prepares a record that interprets the site for its significant engineering or function. Often, the interpretive drawings use existing documents as a basis for the measurements rather than measure the structure in the field; the objective is to interpret a concept, not an existing condition, so that the structure can be rebuilt exactly in all its historic details.

The documentary record explains the form or function of lighthouses using a variety of graphic techniques. The basic drawing includes measured elevations, plans, and sections. More intricate interpretive drawings use axonometric techniques to explain the three-dimensional forms and arrangement of parts. These include planometrics (a rotated plan with vertical elements projected from it), or isometric projections which utilize a 30° angle in its base axis. Axonometrics are also used to develop "exploded" or "peel-away" views that illustrate how pieces fit together. Photographs or conceptual information are often translated into illustrations or sketches that further explain a process or character of the structure. Large-format black-and-white photography is used to capture the actual physical attributes of the structure and express its context in the landscape and relationship to other structures around it. Photography also provides greater textural details of the material's weathered condition.

Written documentation provides the basic data necessary for understanding the site's development and evolution throughout its working life. Specific descriptive information is recorded, and historical research explains the context, functions, alterations, and theories related to its operation. All materials are produced to archival standards and specific formats that assure a consistent product throughout the collection.

**—Todd Croteau
Architect**